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SUBJECT: HZDS: MECIAR STILL IN CHARGE

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Classified By: Ambassador Rodolphe M. Vallee for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)  
)

¶1. (C) Summary. Vladimir Meciar was reelected Chairman of the co-ruling People's Party - Movement for a Democratic Slovakia (HzDS) at a party congress on June 9. Meciar won with 90 percent of the vote after his challenger, Deputy-Chairman Viliam Veteska, withdrew on the morning of the congress and checked himself into hospital for what was later found to be a brain tumor. MP Tibor Mikus, Head of the Trnava region and Veteska's strongest supporter, accepted a nomination from the floor to challenge Meciar in Veteska's place. The Mikus/Veteska challenge has been credited with disrupting Meciar's plans to change the party's statutes so as to secure his own personal control. A vengeful Meciar is likely to try to force Mikus out of HzDS in the near future. Veteska's fate will depend on his health and contrition, though speculation has already begun as to who might replace him as Deputy Speaker of the National Parliament. End summary.

#### THE PARTY CONGRESS

¶2. (U) In a voice-vote, 217 out of 240 delegates supported Meciar. The only delegates to support Mikus came from his own region of Trnava and the eastern region of Presov. (Comment. Even Veteska's most optimistic supporters believed his only chance to win would be if the vote were held by secret ballot. Reftel. End comment.) After Mikus announced Veteska had to withdraw due to hospitalization, Meciar appeared headed for a ninth consecutive biennial win without a challenger until Milan Cagala, a former HzDS MP and Minister of Economy, nominated Mikus. In accepting the nomination, Mikus said he was doing so out of respect for Cagala, even though the end-result, Meciar's victory, was a foregone conclusion. While Meciar spoke to the Congress for one hour, Mikus was given a mere three minutes to make his case. In his speech Mikus said the party needs greater openness so that people who hold different opinions are not considered traitors and conspirators. He added that he hopes the party will make it to parliament again in three years, but pointedly underscored that electoral success is the Chairman's responsibility. (Comment. Mikus has previously said HzDS will not get into Parliament in the future unless Meciar allows changes in the way it does business. End comment.)

¶3. (U) Even after defeat, Mikus said he hopes to remain in the party. Mikus left the congress immediately after the vote explaining he was going to visit Veteska in hospital. In response to a question, Mikus explained that he didn't applaud after Mr. Meciar finished his address because "I was writing my speech and it is difficult to write while standing."

¶4. (U) Although Meciar's victory was a smashing one, his need to respond to a leadership challenge is thought to have distracted him from a plan to tighten his control of HZDS.

Meciar had hoped to enact changes to the party statutes that would allow him to be elected for four years instead of two, and allow him to appoint district and regional HZDS heads who are currently elected by the Party Presidium. (Reftel) Meciar has not, however, given up his desire to change the party statutes. He has already called for a convention that will focus on necessary amendments to the party by-laws. The date of that convention has not yet been set, but party contacts have suggested it could be held as early as Fall 2007.

#### MECIAR'S EU DREAM

15. (U) Meciar claimed during his speech that LS-HZDS is in negotiations with the European Parliament faction Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), and that a final decision can be expected by September. Graham Watson, leader of the ALDE faction, denied Meciar's words in an interview with local media the day after the HZDS Congress. According to Watson, ALDE has been contacted twice by members of HZDS but no negotiations have taken place. Furthermore, Watson said that ALDE had refused HZDS, invitation to send a representative to the June 9 Congress. When told that Meciar had suggested HZDS could be a member of ALDE as early as September, Watson responded "he may well have said this, but I can assure you that it's not true." (Comment. Acceptance by western governments and political parties has been an ambition of Meciar since his party lost power in 1998. For HZDS to be accepted by an EP faction now would be especially gratifying since it would become the only governing party in good standing with an EP faction. Smer has been suspended from the Party of European Socialists (PES) grouping since went into government with the Slovak National Party (SNS) in July 2006. End comment.) Meciar claimed in his speech to the party congress that LS-HZDS is an internationally accepted

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party, "We are the only ruling party that they accept, Smer and the SNS have problems abroad." At the same time, Meciar underscored that HZDS is a reliable partner in the ruling coalition and will always support it.

16. (C) Comment. Meciar is still firmly in control of HZDS and, despite not having been able to make certain changes to the statutes at the June 9 Congress, it is still clear that he sets the rules for the party and others will be expected to obey or suffer consequences. The presence of disgraced former Head of the Slovak Information Service (SIS) Ivan Lexa in a front-row seat at the Congress, and Meciar's renewed call for him to be "rehabilitated," is yet another sign that - however much his rhetoric may change - Meciar remains too-sympathetic to the people and methods he made use of when he ran the country that then-Secretary Albright called "the black hole of Europe." End comment.

#### REACTIONS

17. (U) Political analyst Grigorij Meseznikov said the HZDS Congress changed nothing, and predicted that the party will continue to lose votes, but will die only when Meciar does. SDKU MP Iveta Radicova found no surprise in the result, "What we expected is that which happened." KDH MP Maria Sabolova said the tone and length of Meciar's speech at the Congress reminded her of Fidel Castro. SMK MP Jozsef Berenyi also said the result was predictable, and believes that Meciar's re-election may stabilize HZDS, voter preferences.

#### VETESKA'S HEALTH AND FUTURE

18. (U) Veteska regained consciousness on Tuesday June 12 after surgery to remove a tumor. According to a hospital spokesperson, Veteska remains in stable condition and is expected to remain in hospital for several weeks. Press reports suggest the tumor was malignant, and physician and HZDS Vice-Chairman Milan Urbani told Ambassador that the cancer was "the worst kind" and quite advanced. While Veteska remains in hospital, Meciar has played the gentleman and not

taken action against his rival. Meciar has stressed that Veteska is a well-meaning person who was instigated by "others" to challenge him. Although HzDS leaders have been quiet about the possibility of replacing Veteska as Deputy Speaker of Parliament while his health condition is still uncertain, speculation has focused on HzDS MPs Milan Urbani, Jan Kovarcik, Katarina Tothova, or Zdenka Kramplova.

VALLEE